THE JUSTICE OF GUIDO.

BY ELEANOR M. INGRAM,

Author of "Two Who Learned," "The Last Throw," etc.

AND now I own your charming house," declared the English gentleman.

He nodded his head playfully as he spoke, and his blond curls sent a sunny flash across the huge, gloomily imposing room. His gray eyes were frank and young, and he smiled at the grim old man opposite while folding the papers.

"You own one of my houses," assented the Italian gentleman, unmoved and unresponsive. "Salvatore"—to the servant who entered—"bring fruit and wine; and summon Donna Faustina."

Roger Neville's face brightened still more, younger than ever in his surprise.

"*Signore,* there are ladies in your family?" he exclaimed. "I did not know."

"I have a daughter," said his host coldly.

There was a pause. "Faustina Faustiniani," repeated Neville mentally. He was familiar with the Italian usage of giving the family name in feminine form to the daughter of a noble house, but nevertheless the musical iteration pleased his fancy. "Faustina Faustiniani; it is the tinkling of little golden bells! Faustina——"

The sombre house was very still; no one could have imagined that it was in the core of the teeming city of Belfiore. All sounds of outside life fell back baffled from the massive, fortress-thick walls. A sense of dampness, of mould and age haunted the atmosphere. "Faustina," Neville inwardly repeated, idly amused.

The door at the end of the room silently opened; the servant reëntered, bearing a salver. Behind him walked a girl, clad in heavy black velvet that was not darker than her hair and was less dark than her large eyes. Quite noiselessly she came toward them; against the blending darknesses her delicate face showed translucently fair, almost wan, and so very still that the watcher involuntarily caught his breath as before a thing unnatural.

"The fruit is newly bought?" demanded Count Faustiniani of the servant.

"My lord, it was purchased in the public market half an hour since," the man assured.

"Give me a cup."

The servant selected a goblet at random and presented it to his master with the readiness of one following a usual custom. Count Faustiniani as deliberately filled it from the silver jug, rose and held out the cup toward his daughter.

"Drink," he bade harshly.

In silence the young girl accepted and obeyed, raising the shining cup to her lips; then, returning it, curtsied formally and moved a step back to withdraw.

"*Signore,*" stammered the astounded Neville, aroused by her motion from the amazement with which he had witnessed the scene, "*signore,* am I not to have the honor of being presented to the *signora?*"

"Donna Faustina, I present to you, at his request, Lord Roger Neville, the English envoy to the Duke of Belfiore," said her father, his hard severity unchanging.

Faustina curtsied mutely to the guest, but before she could retreat Neville had reached her, bowing over the frail hand she was forced to yield him.

"*Signora,* I am graced by this meeting," he murmured, unconsciously

hushing his tones in deference to her stillness.

She lifted her eyes to him for the first time, gathering in one comprehensive glance the warm youth and good frankness of his face and bearing, the peculiar sunniness of his eager gray eyes and fair hair enhanced by the rich dress of the period. Neville saw some emotion ripple wavelike across her face, saw almost a visible sob rise in her desolate eyes, but before he could analyze or respond she had turned away to follow the servant from the room.

"You will take some refreshment," recalled the host.

Neville impatiently shook his head, then as abruptly retracted the mistake and resumed his seat.

"Pardon; with pleasure. I—the beauty of Donna Faustina confused me."

Count Faustiniani's expression grew of sarcastic wonder, but he said nothing.

Half an hour later, when Neville went down the steps, he paused to look back at the sullen building whose marble façade was faded by age and crossed by deep fissures in which the lichen clung. To the gay, young noble it seemed a prison.

"Faustina Faustiniani," he mused. "Faustina—Neville. What is wrong in there?"

The windows on either side gazed down at him blankly, repelling his curiosity.

That night there was a festival at the palace of the Duke Guido del'Isoletto, ruler and autocrat of the city and province of Belfiore. And, of course, the English envoy was present.

"Your highness, how does one court a lady in this country?" asked Roger Neville of his host, finding himself at that noble's side during the lull before supper.

The duke turned his dark, vivid face that way, amused.

"As in any other country, I imagine," he responded. "Fire and tow are men and women; approach the two and the flames are up."

"But I mean—her parents. I mean seriously."

"A question of barter, Lord Neville. What will you give for her, and how little dower will you take? *You* are rich, hence invincible."

Neville moved in discontented irritation, and glanced down the shining hall toward where the Duchess Gemma held her court.

"Your lady is not here to-night," Guido interpreted, following the gaze. "Come, I am but a few months married and can sympathize with a lover; who is she?"

"Your highness, it is too soon to speak."

"I *can* keep a secret."

"If it were Donna Faustina Faustiniani?"

"Ah!" exclaimed the duke, startled; and fell silent.

"Your highness——" Neville began eagerly.

The duke rose, smiling a light excuse, and moved away to another group. Chilled and vaguely dismayed, Neville was left staring after him, dazed at the change wrought by the mention of that soft-syllabled name.

It was the hour of supper, when, seated beside his partner, Neville's avid curiosity led him to essay again.

"Tell me, *contessa,* are not the Faustiniani an old and noble family of this place?" he asked of the fair coquette at his side.

"Of the oldest and noblest, *signore,*" she assured.

"I have never seen Donna Faustina Faustiniani at ball or festival since my arrival. Is that not strange?"

The *contessa* put out her small, jeweled hand to take her wineglass; he fancied she paled slightly and her red lips moved before she replied:

"Donna Faustina—I have not the honor to know her. Strange? Perhaps. Is it true that it rains all the time in your land, Lord Neville?"

Again the subject was put aside from his grasp. Obstinacy tingled along each nerve as he made answer at random; the obstinate determination to know more.

"Donna Faustina——" he recommenced.

"I would rather not speak of Donna Faustina, *signore,*" the *contessa* checked.

"Why not, *signora?*"

"A fancy."

"She is the most beautiful woman I ever saw," he retorted viciously, and inaccurately. It was not the beauty of the young face which haunted him, but its exquisite purity and hushed desolation.

"Oh, certainly," drawled the *contessa,* secure in superior fairness, and turned her shoulder to him.

Neville turned the other way, angry with all Belfiore. There were awake in him two of the most powerful of emotions: the desire to protect, and the desire to know.

He tried once more that night, but not in the palace. When he mounted the steps of his own house, hours later, a beggar crept up.

"Charity, my lord, charity for an old man! It will bring you luck—I will bring you success with your lady, if you but whisper her name."

Neville halted.

"How know you I have a lady, old man? And why her name?"

"You are young, noble cavalier," was the dry response. "For the rest, if a lady's name is linked in a whisper with yours at the Lovers' Well before dawn, you two will come together. All Belfiore knows that magic."

A coin in his fingers, Neville hesitated, spurred by that avid curiosity to try an effect even at the cost of delicacy.

"Suppose the name were—Faustina?" he suggested.

The beggar drew back.

"An uncommon name!" he muttered, his voice altering. "I have heard it but once in Belfiore. Give me a *soldo, signore,* and let me go; that is no name for the Lovers' Well."

"Dare you hint ill of it, scoundrel?" cried Neville savagely.

The man made a rapid sign in the light from the open door, retreating.

"No one speaks ill of the Signorina Faustina Faustiniani, *signore.*"

Furious, Neville flung the coin after him, and went in. Duke, great lady, beggar; he had questioned each, and obtained—what? He did not know, yet he shivered on his own threshold.

There was not a noble house in Belfiore at which the English envoy was not welcome; why, then, should he have taxed every resource to gain admittance into the grim, lonely Palazzo Faustiniani? There was not a festival in the city to which he was not bidden; why, then, so force circumstance that Count Faustiniani must ask him to dine? Yet he did both.

The dining room of the house was huge, lofty, and dim, even at midday. In its centre, when Neville entered, stood a table laid for two. There was neither chair nor cover set for the one whom the guest's eyes desired above all things.

"Be seated, *signore,*" invited Count Faustiniani, coldly courteous. "I trust the house you purchased of me has met your wishes; I have heard that Guido Romano redecorates it for you. You then remain for some time in Belfiore?"

"Yes," Neville answered, with an effort at attention.

"I am glad to hear it. A pleasant city."

There was nothing to eat or drink upon the table, absolutely nothing. Neville noted that first. And as a servant entered with a salver of food, a door at the end of the room opened and closed, the soft brushing of trailing velvets passed across the floor. Neville sprang up, turning.

She came very quietly, as before; her heavy black lashes sweeping her cheeks, her face pearl-pale and still. Moving on to her father, she curtsied to him, then turned and swept the same salute to the other. But Neville came forward and claimed her hand, raising it to his lips.

"*Signora,* it is a joy to see you again," he said earnestly.

Faustina met his eyes with the deso-

late directness of her own, answering nothing. Her small, soft fingers were not perfumed or jeweled as those of the other women he met; no nun could have been more innocent of coquetry.

"Pray, take your seat, Lord Neville," broke in the count's harsh voice. "The customs of my house are fixed."

Neville looked across, with a flash of defiance. In spite of Faustina's faint resistance, he advanced a chair and placed her in it before resuming his own seat.

The first course of the dinner had been put on the board. Deliberately, Count Faustiniani filled a cup of wine and passed it to the girl.

"Drink," he bade.

As before, she obeyed mutely and patiently. Then the cups of host and guest were filled, the first dish uncovered. But, before serving the meat, the master passed a portion to Faustina.

"Eat," the order came.

Without change of color or expression, she tasted the food. Again the servant came forward and served the other two. Stupefied, Neville looked on with an amazement past speech. The gray old noble opposite, the dull, tapestried room, the frail, submissive girl—the scene was too unreal.

But, when a third dish appeared, a third portion set aside, the young Englishman started up.

"What is this?" he cried vehemently. "Count, what is this? I will not sit and see insult offered this lady."

"Sit, Lord Neville," advised the other, his irony of tone striking coldly across the hot, indignant protest. "Sit and eat. Have you never seen a king or baron who kept a taster to safeguard himself from poison?"

Neville cast a horrified glance at the girl, who lay, rather than sat, in the high-backed chair.

"A taster! Yes, a serf, a hireling. Never did I hear of one who used his daughter for shield. *Signore, signore,* are we all mad, that I think I hear you say that?"

A dull red crept under the count's withered skin.

"You are a stranger in my house and in this Italy, young cavalier," he retorted. "I guard myself against the danger by means of the one who would create it. Know you not that in this our country there has existed a reign of household war, that women have learned to use a secret weapon against their lords? I tell you, husbands die at the hands of their wives, and no one is the wiser. The unwelcome betrothed takes death from his bride, troublesome fathers from their daughters, brothers from sisters who covet their inherit-

Behind him walked a girl clad in heavy black velvet.

ance. The ground beneath our feet is mined away by these soft creatures. Sit, and meddle not with that which concerns you not."

"And for that you treat this lady so? No, I will not sit before this outrage. Is not every woman in Italy subject to such suspicion, yet is any other one so used? Why single out your daughter?"

A curious hush followed the question. The servant went out at his master's signal, closing the door carefully. Faustina sat with her hands clasped over her heart, her large black eyes fixed straight before her.

"Why single out your daughter?" Neville repeated, standing, flushed and wrathful. It was in his mind that the old man was insane.

"Why?" echoed the count slowly. "Why? Take the knowledge that all Belfiore possesses, *signore;* my daughter dwells at liberty only because she is clever enough to have given no proof against herself. Never yet did any one wrong or anger this girl but he died. Two years ago, a servant was insolent to her; he died next day. Last summer a maid refused her obedience; she died within an hour. A few months ago, a beggar asked her for alms, at the gate, and when she had no coins he snarled some abuse. She spoke him gently and bade him go to the kitchen to be fed; he died that night. Twice I escaped poison in my cup, escaped by mere chance. Who put it there? No one knows; but since then I guard myself."

For a long moment Neville stared at him, wordless, as the other gazed grimly back. He honestly believed the Italian insane, and pity for the helpless young girl suffocated him.

"For this—mere coincidence, mere guess, you disgrace her," he stammered at last, groping for speech in his anger. "You dare——"

"She is mine, Lord Neville."

The arrogant rebuke was a flash of light on the path, showing the way. Scarlet, Neville drew himself up, and bowed.

"Signore Count Faustiniani, when I first had the honor of beholding your daughter, I was struck with love for her. I ask her hand in marriage."

Faustina cried out faintly, and hid her face.

"There is more," said her father, after the first surprise.

"I have little wish to hear it, *signore.*"

"I insist that you shall. Eighteen months ago, I betrothed her to a noble from Rome, whom I deemed fit to deal with her. He was not young or comely, and she was averse to the marriage, although outwardly obedient. A month before the wedding day, the Roman died."

Without deigning reply, Neville crossed to Faustina. At his approach she raised her head and lifted to his gaze her clear, hushedly tragic eyes.

"Donna Faustina," he said, "when I saw you, I knew there was no other wife for me. It is not possible, I am not worthy, that you should have felt so toward me; but if you will come, I will shelter you from all wrong; and, please God, you may come to love me."

"You take me like this?" she articulated, with difficulty. "Asking nothing? Trusting me?"

"Yes."

She looked at him, at his splendid youth and ardent courage, the rich faith shining in his gray eyes; and, suddenly, her utter loneliness rose and flung down the walls of composure.

"I love you now," she gasped. "I love you now. But go, go." Her forehead sank to the arm of the chair as she broke into heavy sobs.

If all Belfiore had risen against her then, he would but have held her closer. If all Italy had cried her guilty, he would have proclaimed her innocent. He kissed her hand, and faced the watcher.

"*Signore,* my answer?"

"You have been warned," said Count Faustiniani. "If you want her, set the marriage day when you choose."

Neville looked down at the bent dark head, his heart singing.

The marriage of Roger Neville and Faustina Faustiniani made the wonder of an idle day. Yet the wedding took place with all due ceremony, and no one ventured to affront the wife of the envoy from England. So, in the brilliant little court, Faustina Neville took her place. But the stories and mystery lived abroad in the city.

"What servants would you bring with you, sweetheart?" Neville had asked his betrothed, the day before their marriage.

"There is no one who cares for me except Marta, my nurse," she answered mournfully. "I come desolate, as I have lived."

"So much more are we together," he smiled, well content.

They were together. Yet, though Faustina learned to wear flowers and gems, though she laid aside black for the gorgeous apparel her husband approved, and lived his life of gayety and festival, yet the inner legend of her face was changelessly sorrowful. And though she and Neville loved one another with passionate devotion, yet he felt that from some phases of her thought he was shut out.

It was a couple of months after the marriage that the Duchess Gemma received two tiny spaniels from France. They arrived during a fête held in the gardens of the palace, and were there presented to their mistress.

Now, the Duchess Gemma was young, and firm in tastes or distastes. When the messenger had retired, she sat, with white chin in white hand, and surveyed her pets.

"I do not like dogs," was the final verdict, given in her full, imperious voice. "Take them away."

"But they are adorable, *signora!*" protested one of the ladies. "See only how that one looks at you, Lady Neville."

Faustina turned that way, and smiled.

"As if it loved one," she assented. "Indeed, they are charming."

"Luigi, let one of the dogs be sent to the rooms of the Contessa Marca, and the other to the house of Lady Neville," directed the duchess. "Thanks for the rescue, ladies."

The *contessa* broke into a pretty effusion of acceptance. Faustina, always quiet, moved across, to caress the little animal held in the servant's leash. But as she stooped, the nervous, overstrained spaniel, mistaking her motion, snarled sharply, and set his teeth in her wrist.

The contessa screamed aloud, the cry echoed by the duchess as she sprang up. Every one present turned that way and saw Faustina, standing erect, a thin red stream flowing down her wrist, across her frail, gem-encrusted hand, and dripping on the shimmering rose-color brocade of her gown. But it was the white strangeness of her face as she looked at the spaniel, not fainting or crying out, like any other woman, which struck the group silent.

Neville reached her first.

"Faustina!" he exclaimed. "Sweetheart, your arm!"

She turned to him, trembling violently then; and the spectators crowded around them with tardy sympathy and aid.

"Luigi, drown that dog," the duchess commanded, recovering. "Now!"

Across the space, Faustina heard, as her husband bandaged her arm with handkerchiefs.

"No, no, *signora,*" she interposed. "I beg of you to let me have the dog. It was an accident."

"You still want it?" the duchess queried, amazed.

"It is not vicious, *signora.* Pray, spare it."

Gemma shrugged her shoulders, yielding to a forbearance she could not understand.

The wound was trivial. But Neville bore his wife home, and remained by her side the rest of the day. Indeed, Faustina was pale and shaken, although refusing all except her maid Marta's simple surgery.

The house that Neville had bought of his father-in-law possessed a garden, running down to the river that threaded Belfiore's heart. Here, on a stone seat near the lapping water, Neville was

reading when Faustina came to him next morning.

"Roger, you would never let me speak of the story my father told you," she said, her low voice unsteady.

Frowning in startled displeasure, he closed his book.

"Nor will I now, Faustina. A series of coincidences, an old man's sick fancy—why recall that?"

She drew a step nearer, her eyes a dark fire in her white face.

"Yet my father told a truth. Those who injure me, die. Oh, Roger, Roger, never speak to me harshly, never look at me angrily, lest I lose you. Whatever my fault, whatever the cause, keep silence. For I love you, love you——" She sank suddenly to the grass and laid her head on his knee, shaken with sobs.

Dismayed, pitying yet angered, he caught her in his arms.

"Sweetheart, what is this folly? What frightened you? Hush, hush!"

"The dog is dead," she whispered. "The dog is dead."

A chill shot through Neville's veins, a half-superstitious horror. He wanted to comfort her with light words, to tell her that no doubt the animal had been sick when it attacked her, and its death had followed naturally; but somehow he found no speech. The moments passed, and still they clasped one another in silence. After a while, he kissed her, and they went in together.

The summer merged into the radiant Italian autumn. There was no change in the life of the Nevilles; day by day their love grew more into the fibre of both, so that it became the admiration of brilliant, cynical Belfiore.

On that eve of All Saints, Neville came into his wife's room, less ceremoniously than usual.

Faustina was seated before a large oval mirror, while old Marta braided and coiled the silken weight of hair, preparing her mistress for the vigil at church.

"Sweetheart, have you that miniature I gave you?" he inquired abruptly.

Faustina looked up, with her rare flush.

"No," she acknowledged. "Roger, it disappeared last week. I feared to tell you, lest you should fancy I did not value your portrait."

"You overvalued it, I know," he answered. "It is no matter—a silly tale was current in the house concerning it."

Her clear eyes followed him in wonder as he moved impatiently to a chair. Old Marta, reading the face reflected in the mirror, spoke out in shrill explanation:

"*Si, signora;* the servants say that the yellow-haired girl from Geneva, who cleans the floors, has the little ivory picture of my lord, which she stole for love of his beauty."

Crimson from bosom to temples, Faustina rose.

"Roger?" she cried. "Roger? Oh, no, no! I will not bear it."

Scarlet no less, he also rose.

"Faustina, you doubt——"

"No, never! But I will not bear it—she has no right. You are mine, mine!"

All an Italian's fiery jealousy was in the cry. Human enough to delight in it, Neville sprang to take her in his arms.

"Sweetheart, sweetheart," he soothed.

"I hate her," Faustina panted. "I hate——"

She broke off sharply; he felt her stiffen in his embrace, then shiver from head to foot.

"Let us go to church," she added, after a silent moment.

He released her, and she went back to where the lean-faced, keen-eyed Marta waited, brush in hand.

In the gray dawn, they returned from the great cathedral. Wan with fatigue, Faustina went to her room. But the steward approached Neville, who lingered in the hall, drawing off his gloves.

"My lord, would it please you to give me directions?" he asked soberly. "The servant maid from Geneva, Benedetta, died last night."

An armchair stood beside them.

Neville sat down there, cloak and silver-fringed gloves slipping to the floor.

"Do all necessary," he said presently. "Go, now."

There was a horror through the house. Of the event, Neville said nothing to Faustina, nor she to him, yet each knew the other's knowledge of it. But his unaltered kindness to her could not hush rumor; the tragedy that had lain so long in the mistress' eyes stalked openly in Casa Neville now. During the day, several of the servants left. Worse, the story crept abroad, and flew from mouth to mouth on the Lung' Aretusa, passed behind fluttering fans and across gay tables; the new tales linked with the old.

That afternoon Neville received a visit from Count Faustiniani, the first.

"Where is your wife, Lord Neville?" the grim old man demanded of his son-in-law.

"In her room, *signora.* She is not well," he answered, his English composure never so faultless.

"Not well? She has a conscience, then? Tell me"—the count drew nearer in keen scrutiny—"you believe now that I was right in my judgment of her?"

"No."

"Not yet? How will you live, after this?"

"As always, *signore.* Why should we change?"

Count Faustiniani turned to go.

"You are a brave man, Lord Neville. But I watch murder no more. Tell your wife that when the next one dies at her hand, I denounce her to the duke."

"*Signore!*" Neville exclaimed, stunned.

"The next," he repeated, and went out.

As he passed through the door, another visitor crept in and crouched down by Neville's hearth, an unrelenting, unceasing presence: Fear. And the sword the spectre held suspended was that phrase, *the next.* Who would be next, and when? Would there be a next? And how, why?

"If I could know," appealed Roger Neville, from his darkness, "if I could understand!"

But he never doubted his wife. It was superstition against which his strong sense struggled. He lived in a land and age where people believed in the evil eye, in sorcery, in malignant stars and influences.

They picked up their life again, after the first day. Never had friends and acquaintances been more warmly courteous to Faustina Neville. One might have thought they dreaded offending her. The entrance of this fragile, stately girl, with the still face and unfathomable dark eyes, would hush the gayest group. Did she realize this? Neville did not ask. But he now saw in a new light how carefully gentle she was to all those around her, as if on her part she feared provoking injury and sought to live in peace. Like frightened children, they drew closer together in silence.

When the winter brought Christmas week, with all its festivals, Roger Neville, in response to a playful desire of the Duchess Gemma's, gave that supper which has passed down with the traditions of Guido's reign. Telling the story, men called it *la cena inglesa:* the English supper. The viands had been sent from London, were dressed by a London cook, and served in English Yuletide manner so far as possible. And to the novel feast the duke and duchess lent their presence.

Laughter, light, the gleam of jewels and tinted costumes, and over all the rich, aromatic fragrance of evergreens, holly, and mistletoe—there seemed no shadow on Casa Neville that night.

"But, tell me how, with all these good things at home, Lord Neville, you consent to stay with us?" the duke queried, at last.

The laughing Italians were tasting their first plum pudding, tossing back and forth joyous comment and jest. Neville laughed also, as he replied:

"Your highness, Italy is the garden of the world, and I have gathered one of its brightest flowers. I am half a Belfiorentino."

When he mounted the steps of his own house a beggar crept up.

"*Evviva* my new citizen! All gratitude to you, Lady Neville."

"Belfiore had won my lord's heart before I met him, your highness," Faustina disclaimed, raising her liquid eyes to the vivid, clear-cut face of the most polished and keenly intellectual noble who had ever ruled the city, and, according to rumor, the most coolly unscrupulous.

"You should permit Lord Neville his pretty speeches of you, Donna Faustina," interposed a handsome, ruddy-haired Venetian woman. "We can easily believe they mean nothing."

The tone and accent were so insolent as to draw attention and produce an instant's pause. The speaker was halfway down the long table at which the duke and duchess occupied the head, Faustina and Neville seated at their right and left.

"Pardon, *marchesa,*" corrected the Duchess Gemma's slow, full voice across the silence; "any one who knows Lord and Lady Neville, knows that his speech was no jest. But I need not explain the possibilities of married love to *you.*"

An open smile went around, the *marchesa's* marital troubles being public property. The Venetian bit her red lip, but ventured no retort, and a rush of light chat flowed over the discord.

Faustina had remained mute from surprise. Now she looked across at her husband, but Neville's gaze was fixed on the cup he played with, and his color had deepened. Perhaps his wife was the only one present ignorant of the flirtation carried on between him and the Venetian coquette during his early weeks in Belfiore; a flirtation abandoned upon his first glimpse of Faustina Faustiniani.

"Never mind the spiteful *marchesa, cara mia,*" observed the duchess, *sotto voce.* "She is jealous; she liked your blond husband."

Faustina shrank, flushing painfully. But at once pride brought her small head erect.

"I am sorry for her," she retorted haughtily, and looked full at her enemy down the table.

Unfortunately, the Venetian raised her eyes and encountered that straight glance of conscious superiority, the assured strength of the wife regarding the vanquished rival. Into her face stormed the defiant answer, and the lists were open for battle.

"I am marveling, milord," lisped a pale young exquisite of the court, "how we shall return this feast to you. How can we hope your indulgence for our dull efforts?"

"Oh, have no fear, Count Antonio," broke in the Venetian, her voice sharp-

ened by passion. "Lord Neville is very charitable, as he proved in his marriage."

This time the offense was too great to be ignored.

"*Signora,* I fail to understand your wit," Neville exclaimed, white with anger.

"Yes?" her darkened brows lifted. "Why, milord, every one knows that Donna Faustina had waited long for a suitor, and would have died a maid but for you. Why make a secret of public facts?"

"*Signora!*" cried a dozen shocked voices.

"*Marchesa!*" rang Neville's furious challenge.

The duchess had risen to her feet, and with her every woman except the culprit. But before all speech was Faustina's movement, as she leaned across the table, extending her hands toward her enemy.

"*Signora,* go, go!" she implored, her anguished tones hushing the room. "If you care for your life, touch nothing here, and leave Belfiore. Go, go tonight—rest not; linger not, but go."

Frozen, the people stared at her, every sinister memory arising.

"Why should I go?" demanded the Venetian.

Faustina pressed both hands over her heart.

"Because if you stay, you die," she answered. "Save yourself."

"Faustina!" Neville cried, aghast.

Daunted for an instant, the *marchesa* regained herself.

"You hear, all, how Lady Neville threatens me," she appealed. "Are people to be driven from the city for a light word? Protect me, gentlemen."

"I threaten not, menace not—I warn," said Faustina clearly. "Go, *signora,* or——"

The other snatched the word.

"Or? Or? Your highness, I demand justice. Shall death be given at will, and the Duke of Belfiore find no remedy? I denounce Lady Neville."

The room was in a tumult. The duke's firm hand forced Neville back into his seat, as he would have sprung to Faustina.

"Silence, all," Guido commanded. "Resume your seats, gentlemen. *Marchesa,* of what do you accuse Lady Neville?"

"Of what?" The Venetian swept the circle with her hard eyes. "Is not her history known to all? Is there any one here who does not know of the servant who disobeyed her, the beggar who offended, the suitor who displeased? Did not her father fear for his own life? And since her marriage have there not died the dog who wounded her and the maid who woke her jealousy? I accuse Lady Neville of assassination by poison, and I ask protection from her open menace."

The people were quiet enough now. The duke's command had been obeyed, and only the accuser and the accused remained standing.

"Lady Neville, do you answer nothing?" questioned Guido gravely.

"I will answer what I can, your highness," Faustina replied, her soft and desolate accents sending a curious thrill through the hearers. "For very long I have known such an hour as this would come to me—for what the *marchesa* says of those who died, is true."

"Faustina!" Neville cried, again.

She turned her beautiful eyes to him.

"Is true, except that I never caused or wished their deaths. What blight there is in me I do not know, but those who injure me, die. I have watched it until I thought that I would die also."

"A desperate tale!" the Venetian sneered.

"But it is true," was the simple answer.

On Faustina, the duke's clairvoyant gaze had dwelt steadily.

"Have all who injured you died, Lady Neville?" he asked.

"There was one who escaped, your highness; a gentleman from Rome. But he left Belfiore that same night. That is why I bade the *marchesa* go."

"Did this Roman offend you in your own house?"

"No; at the palace, *signore.*"

"After your marriage?"

"Yes. I hoped then that with my marriage the blight had ceased——" Her voice died out.

"Faustina!" Neville cried, striving to rise.

Again the duke's hand compelled him to remain still.

"Lady Neville, do you believe these deaths are by poison?"

"No," she responded, "because there was no one who could have given it but me."

The childish candor struck the heart of every one present, a murmur and stir ran through the circle. Only Guido was unmoved.

"Was it not observed in the city that you came alone to your husband's house?" he demanded.

"Yes," she confirmed. "I came alone, except for my old nurse, Marta Foresti. No one cared to come but her. No one ever cared for me, until——"

The duke bent his head, writing a line on a leaf from his ivory tablet. Released, Neville rose and went around the table, his fair head erect.

"Witness all," he declared, "that my faith in this lady, my wife, is absolute. There is no flaw in her, and no man shall say there is such while I live."

Faustina turned to him as he came beside her.

"I never should have married you!" she exclaimed piteously. "I knew this. I should have sent you away, but I loved you so."

The Venetian called out, but no one heard her. Neville passed his arm about his wife's slight figure, and she leaned against him in silence. The fearless Duchess Gemma's movement was checked by Guido, as she would have gone to her favorite.

"Wait, my treasure," cautioned the duke. "We have a little more to say,

9 "Those who injure me die."

while we wait for the officers of justice, for whom I have sent."

A gasp came from the spectators.

"Your highness, I am an English subject, and my wife takes my nationality," Neville protested fiercely. "You have no jurisdiction over her."

The duke looked at him, open raillery in his brilliant smile.

"Lord Neville, England is very far away, and I am very near. We will proceed. I have a fancy——"

He paused, meditating. There was the ring of spurred feet in the halls, the passing and repassing of many steps. A door slammed somewhere. Neville stooped to Faustina's ear.

"Sweetheart, when they come, I shall carry you to the room behind and rally my own few Englishmen. Be ready."

"Let the officers take me, Roger."

"Never!"

"I have a fancy," resumed Guido tranquilly, "to consider your mystery, my acute people. You have been so clever. Let us review. We have here a young girl, gentle and timid, all of whose enemies die. Enemies? I should have said all who offer her the most trivial injury, even an animal, even a beggar. She kills them, you decide. If so, she is a madwoman; and Lady Neville is not mad."

Faustina raised her face, to gaze at the speaker, startled, and Guido gazed calmly back as he continued, in his light irony of tone:

"Come; I know exactly as much of this case as you all, no more. But I have listened differently, perhaps. I have heard that these deaths occurred only when the offender and the offense were known to Donna Faustina's household; when the Roman displeased her at the palace, he escaped. The quest narrows. Further, the deaths took place both before and after the lady's marriage, proving that she brought the assassin from the Palazzo Faustiniani to Lord Neville's house. Now, she has said she brought but one person, and that person loved her. I am merely guessing——"

"I have been blind," cried Neville passionately. "Heaven help us, I have been blind!"

The whole room rose as the smiling duke held up his hand for silence.

"Yet a moment. Lord Neville, I have had your wife's nurse, Marta Foresti, arrested and examined. Let us hear the result."

A glittering officer was at the door. At Guido's sign, he spoke, saluting:

"My lord, I have the honor to report that the woman Marta Foresti went into frenzy on being accused, and boasts of having killed every one who wronged her mistress and foster child, the Lady Faustina Neville."

A great shout echoed through the room, and all restraint broke down. The Duchess Gemma took the dazed Faustina's hands, and kissed her on the forehead, as the Venetian *marchesa* stole, unseen, from the place.

"Your highness——" began Neville, and found no voice for more.

"It has been an amusing evening," said Guido del'Isoletto. "One is so often bored, up here."